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SITE LAYOUT AND RECORDING

by

Edward F. Heite

Archaeologists today generally subscribe to the proposition that our sole objective is the orderly recording of culture history. Yet in practice this principle is honored as frequently in its breach as in its observance.

The essence of archaeology is the reduction of three-dimensional evidence to a two-dimensional record. Clyde Dollar has pointed out that all archaeology is reconstruction, be it verbal, graphic, or actual reconstruction. In this sense, "reconstruction" is the subjective interpretation of objective information that has been collected in a subjective fashion. Because our observations are subjective, no archaeological record can be considered a truly accurate account. No matter how careful we may be, we can record only what we choose to notice. Our choice of data may be conscious or unconscious.

If we are to minimize the sins of preconception and of selective observation, we must clearly consider our purposes and our methods. We must structure our research so that the facts will be self-evident, regardless of the researchers' personalities.

An accurate and scientific excavation requires discipline, consistency, continuity, planning, and technical support. But the most important factor is discipline, an almost military precision and unity of purpose. If a project should fail for lack of orchestration, it is the fault of the organizer, who failed to set rules in advance.

If amateur archaeology has a bad name, it is because some non-professional archaeologists have failed to measure themselves by the universal archaeological standards. Whatever its source, every excavation report is judged against the immutable standards of the archaeological discipline.

Record-keeping is the most important activity on any archaeological site. It permeates every procedure and it takes absolute precedence over all other considerations, including personal comfort, vanity, expense, and politics. There can be no substitute for discipline in this context; only a disciplined and planned project will produce adequate records.

Let us consider the record-keeping equipment and skills that are invaluable to every archaeologist.

First, one needs a battery of photographic equipment. What is the use of digging all those neat holes if the only picture is a fuzzy little snapshot? The most valuable archaeological tool is a sheet-film camera; we prefer the 5" x 7" view camera, because its large negatives permit us to submit contact prints for publication. A 4" x 5" press camera is a good all-purpose tool, especially since its case can

be closed when it is not in use. Such cameras are obsolete for all but technical applications, and may be bought secondhand for a fraction of their true value.

All permanent record photographs should be carefully composed on the groundglass, which means that the camera must be mounted on a tripod. I would never risk composing a record photograph through the inadequate viewfinder of any hand-held camera.

Because we all make ghastly mistakes in the darkroom, I always photograph every feature on roll film as well as sheet film. In addition to the black and white photographs, I always take two sets of slides. The first set is for my own reference in writing the report. The second set will be used in illustrated talks.

The photographer's job should not be delegated frivolously. One person, and only one person, must take charge of the photographic record. If the excavation is complicated, the photographer should not be allowed to dig. Nor should diggers or visitors be allowed to take pictures, for thereby one runs the risk of losing control of the photographic record.

An archaeological photograph should be planned and composed, without tools, spoil piles, people, excessive lables, outhouses, automobiles, and other distractions. Such pristine photographs are no accident. They are the result of careful advance planning. The layout of parking, spoil, comfort stations, signs, and sunlight should be considered before the first stake is driven.

The second half of the archaeological record is kept by the draftsman. Every digger is responsible for his own records, but there must be one person who will ultimately commit all the data to drawings. Of all the team members, the draftsman is most concerned with the tiniest details of the site.

He should know something of surveying, since the transit falls in his department. I cannot over-emphasize the absolute necessity of using a transit or an alidade. The transit is a wonderful tool, that permits us to measure everything in terms of absolute vertical and horizontal constants. These wonderfully versatile tools are also wonderfully cheap; a perfectly adequate instrument can be bought for less than the price of a cheap camera.

No matter how complicated our procedures and our safeguards, our whole effort can be wrecked by outside agents. Among these destructive forces, I would list vandals, bottle collectors, pot hunters, visitors, and newspaper reporters, not necessarily in that order.

The ideal working condition is a completely secret project in an isolated corner of nowhere. But such splendid isolation is a once-in-a-lifetime experience to be relished if ever it comes your way. Most sites are situated too close to civilization for real seclusion, and some interference must be tolerated. No excavation, however, should be conducted in such a manner that the public gets in the way of proper record-keeping.

One may argue that we are working for the public and that our projects should be open to public view. This argument is pure populist nonsense. Is the public invited to medical laboratories, to breathe on the culture dishes? I do not consider the public a collective ass, but I recognize that the public will be careless and troublesome on an archaeological site.

Visitors almost always have an adverse effect on the record. A visitor is not subject to discipline. He must be watched; he must be patronized; and he must have his questions answered. He usually wants to socialize with the workers, and to talk about his bottle collection. But worst of all, the visitor is frequently unable to suppress his urge to get into the hole.

Reporters are a particularly dangerous sort of visitor. They invariably get the story wrong. They take unauthorized photographs of features that are not dressed for photography. But worst of all, a newspaper article is a permanent public record. It may be impossible to reverse an early tentative opinion, simply because it has been published as fact by the local press. Even though I am a former editor, I favor careful management of the news. I insist that any newspaper article appear after the excavation is closed. Publicity during an excavation is an open invitation to vandals and pot hunters.

At the risk of becoming the local grouch, an archaeologist must preserve the academic integrity of his work in the face of every distraction. His reputation rests on the appearance of his site, which is the only testimony to his skill. To avoid unnecessary trouble, we propose these simple rules, which should vastly improve the appearance of our excavations.

1. Spoil will be carried to a designated pile, outside of camera range.
2. No visitor may approach the edge of the excavation.
3. All squares and features must be kept clean until backfilled.
4. The site will be completely covered at night.
5. Lunch may not be eaten on the site.
6. Tools and gear will be removed during photography.
7. Excavators will enter only squares they are assigned.
8. Every digger will keep and submit notes.
9. No camera may be brought to the site, but by the director.
10. Artifacts may be removed only by the designated custodian.

One may say that these are professional rules. This is not so; these are archaeological rules. There must be no distinction, if the amateur expects to see his results accepted by professionals, and vice versa.

As in all team efforts, the disciplined archaeological team functions the best. Cooperative skills must be developed over long periods of mutual effort. Archaeological excavations are no place for mob education and mass entertainment. It is folly to recruit mobs of dig-it-yourself volunteers with promises of picnics, family

recreation, and general good times. If we were to advertise such fables, we would discover that a fascinating pastime has become an unrewarding free-for-all.

After the site itself, the artifact constitutes the most important part of the archaeological record. When it comes from the ground, every artifact has certain attributes that can be rapidly dissipated by careless handling. In adopting a system of artifact management, one should apply certain criteria, aimed at preserving these ephemeral attributes.

The first criterion is durability. The artifact's provenience data must follow it forever. For this reason, one should use durable materials for labelling and packaging the artifacts at all stages. Notes should be made in pencil or grease pencil, never in water-soluble ink or felt marker. I recommend plastic bags and hardware-grade paper bags. Grocery store bags usually are too flimsy, and paper boxes tend to collapse at the merest suggestion of moisture.

The second criterion is intelligibility. The recording system should be simple, yet adequate for recovering the exact find-spot of every object, in terms of soil matrix and spatial coordinates.

The third criterion is preservation. The director must be ready to preserve any fragile or deteriorating artifact that may be encountered. Routine procedures should be established for handling iron, glass, bone, delft, shell, fabric, wood, leather, and a host of other materials including intestinal parasites. Fragile artifacts always are photographed *in situ*.

After an artifact has been dug up, labelled, and preserved, it must be studied and described, for it serves no purpose until it has been recorded and published. Many site reports fail because of inadequate artifact illustrations. Since archaeology is a matter of visual correlation, we must depend upon illustrations to convey an idea of our discoveries.

By far the most satisfactory illustration is a pen-and-ink drawing, a quick and easy medium that can be reliably reproduced by the cheapest sort of printing process. Running a poor second to drawings are artifact photographs, which seldom reproduce well in limited-budget publications. I find that the stipple drawing is easier and quicker to execute than an equally satisfactory artifact photograph.

After it has been studied, drawn, and published, what should happen to the artifact? It must be preserved, of course. But therein lies the seed of dissension. Before the first spadefull of earth is turned, the sponsors of an excavation should make binding written agreements for the disposition of artifacts. If this precaution is neglected, all hell will break loose. I do not understand why otherwise-intelligent people will make perfect asses of themselves over the possession of a few broken dishes. But they will. Let us examine the artifact question rationally, for a change.

Artifacts are very useful to archaeologists and other cultural historians, but only under certain conditions. I propose the following six standards to be used in

measuring an artifact repository.

1. The artifact must be accompanied by its records.
2. The artifact must be available during business hours.
3. The artifact should be deposited in a collection large enough to justify the effort of visiting it.
4. The artifact should be near some population center, where it can be used in educational programs.
5. The artifact should be in the custody of an agency with a trained professional staff and an ongoing research program.
6. The agency holding the artifact should be permanent, and should have facilities for archival preservation.

These simple standards eliminate most of the so-called museums in America, as well as most archaeological organizations. But whatever our feelings of loyalty to the local agency, we must admit that artifacts are useless if they are hidden in a reliquary. One may as well re-bury an artifact as place it in an inadequate repository.

Prison reform has brought untold havoc upon the cause of museums in America. At county seats across the nation, old jails are becoming obsolete. No sooner has the jail been vacated, but the local coven of history ladies has leaped into the breach, shouting: "Save the Old Jail!" With emotional, almost religious fervor, the ladies bully the town fathers into converting the jail into a facsimile of a museum. What collective pang of filial piety moves the ladies to commemorate their ancestors by preserving the county jail? One such jail, in Virginia, has been converted into a memorial to the mother of President Washington. I wonder what that says for patriotism.

Such orgasms of community pride can seldom produce responsible artifact repositories. Nor can a suitable museum be established in the lobby of a public building, an old church, or in the dozens of curious places that have been dignified by the misbegotten misnomer of "county museum."

But when we are faced with local pride, local historical societies, local museums, local politics, and other malignant forces, we must remember that, first and foremost, we are scholars, responsible first to the artifacts, of which we are merely trustees.

Edward F. "Ned" Heite was born in Dover, Delaware, in 1939. He holds the MA degree in history from the University of Richmond. He has served as editor of Virginia Cavalcade magazine, and as archaeological historian for the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. He is currently a Hagley Fellow in history at the University of Delaware and is a member of the Executive Board, Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology.